

11/7/25
For report to President &
press release

Conservation of the Alaska Salmon.

The first salmon cannery in Alaska was established in 1878. From that time the salmon canning industry in the Territory grew in response to the increasing demand for the product and the availability of capital for expanding operations. The peak of production was reached in 1918 when 6,605,835 cases of salmon were packed. The pack in 1925 was smaller than in any preceding year since 1914, except for the year 1921 when, on account of the severe business depression, many canneries did not operate.

At the time of the passage of the Alaska Fisheries Act of June 6, 1924, the salmon fisheries of Alaska had reached a stage of depletion which called for immediate action. That this depletion existed was easily established and in no uncertain manner. The packs of canned salmon had been made in recent years only by ever increasing expansion of fishery operations. Gear had become more extensive in character and amount than ever before. For instance, in the salmon canning industry 288,736 fathoms of gill nets were used in 1915, compared with 332,820 fathoms in 1923. In 1915 there were operated in the industry 284 traps which took an average of 94,782 salmon each, while in 1923, 443 traps were operated with an average catch of only 77,269 salmon each. In 1915 the 85 canneries in Alaska produced 4,500,293 cases of canned salmon, while in 1923 the 130 canneries produced but 5,035,697 cases; in other words the increase of 53% in number of canneries resulted in an increase of only 12% in the pack.

Fishing operations had been extended to waters not before exploited, an example being the establishment of a cannery at the mouth of the Yukon in 1918. Waters which formerly had been very profitable fishing grounds

were becoming less and less productive or were yielding their former quotas only under most intensive fishing. The rapid exhaustion of the Copper River in Central Alaska was a notable example.

The fisheries act of 1924 was well suited to meet the pressing situation for which it was designed. While safeguarding the equal rights of all fishermen, it gave the Secretary of Commerce full authority for restricting the fishery operations to meet the needs of conservation and also set forth the policy to be undertaken for the reestablishment and maintenance of the fishery resources. The general policy for conservation was set forth in the provision that 50 per cent of the annual run of salmon was to be allowed to escape to the spawning grounds.

The procedure of the Department of Commerce under the new law has been to establish broad regulations sufficient to build up to its original size the runs of salmon and at the same time to hamper as little as possible the existing industry. The chief features of the regulations have been the establishment of close seasons, restrictions on the kinds and sizes of gear, restrictions on the take in certain waters, and the total prohibition on fishing in various areas where operations were especially effective in the taking of fish on their way to the spawning grounds.

The regulations are subject to change at any time whenever it appears either that further restrictions are necessary or that additional fishing may be allowed without detriment to conservation. In 1925 the poor run of salmon in Bristol Bay made necessary the immediate closing of the fishing season about the middle of July. On the other hand, the satisfactory condition of the run permitted a relaxation of restrictions in the Kodiak area and in other places.

While the reestablishment of the fishery resources will necessarily be a matter of years, evidences are abundant that the steps already taken have been along proper lines. Since the life cycle of the Pacific salmon varies from two years for one species to four or more for others, it is evident that reconstructive measures cannot immediately result in increased runs of fish. It is by observations at the spawning grounds where the efficiency of the regulations may be determined. Surveys of these grounds have been most encouraging.

October 3, 1925

Memo for Mr. O'Malley

From: HH

I think it is desirable that we make a very short concise report on the work of the Conservation Act on Alaskan Salmon, that we can address to the President and send to the press. This report should start with a statement as to the volume of the salmon pack when it was flourishing (take its maximum), showing what the gradual deterioration in the pack was up until the passage of the Act; recite that the problem here was to secure sufficient escapement from the various fishing grounds to the spawning grounds to replenish the supply; recite the general character of measures taken, the decrease in the pack brought about; summaries of reports of the Bureau on the increased escapement in different sections, or any other device that will bring it out clearly from a public point of view. Show the reduction in traps and dwell a little on the so-called plight of the Indians, the priorities given to the poor in replenishment, the large supplies available in the interior for dog meat and the stoppage of starvation which formerly existed and any other human points that will reinforce the value of the work.

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ALASKA

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FISHERIES

Dr. Gilbert
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